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AUTHOR Taylor, Trent; Rayder, Nicholas
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ABSTRACT

Seventeen myths and misunderstandings affecting disabled and handicapped persons are listed and responded to. It is explained that the listing was developed to abolish stereotyped notions of handicapped children and adults. Among myths listed are that deaf people lead totally different lives than others; mentally retarded persons have strong, uncontrollable sex drives; all persons with a hearing loss can read lips; all wheelchair users are paralyzed and "confined" to their wheelchairs; it is rude for children to be curious about a wheelchair to a wheelchair user; people with a disability expect non-disabled people to help them; the future is bleak for disabled children; and disabled children have a heart of gold. (CL)

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SOME MYTHS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT PEOPLE WHO DIFFER -- A LISTING*

BY

TRENT TAYLOR AND NICHOLAS RAYDER

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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FEW PEOPLE WILL TRAVEL THROUGH THEIR ENTIRE LIVES WITHOUT GOING THROUGH A PERIOD OF DISABILITY OF ONE KIND OR ANOTHER OF SOME DEGREE OF MAGNITUDE. FOR MOST, HOWEVER, THE DISABILITY WILL PROBABLY BE TEMPORARY AND THEY WILL NOT BE INFLUENCED BY THE MYTHS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS THAT AFFECT THE PERMANENTLY DISABLED.

ALTHOUGH MANY OF THE MYTHS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS GIVEN HERE RELATE TO CHILDREN, THEY NATURALLY ALSO APPLY TO ADULTS. WITH MORE "SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN" NOW IN CLASSROOMS ACROSS THE NATION, MORE OF THE GENERAL POPULATION WILL COME INTO CONTACT WITH THE DISABLED. GIVEN UNDERSTANDING, INCREASING AWARENESS, AND CONCERTED EFFORT, THE MYTHS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS SURROUNDING THE DISABLED, PERHAPS MORE EASILY SEEN AND UNDERSTOOD IN RELATION TO CHILDREN, MAY BE LIFTED FROM THE LEVEL OF STEREOTYPE INTO THE LIGHT OF UNDERSTANDING. THEN TOO WE WILL ALSO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE LIVES OF ADULTS WITH DIFFERENCES. AND ALL OF US WILL BENEFIT FROM A SOCIETY WHEN, IF WE BECOME DISABLED, MORE SUPPORT, ACCEPTANCE, AND UNDERSTANDING WILL BE THERE FOR US TO ENJOY.

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* THESE MATERIALS WERE DEVELOPED FOR USE BY THE RESPONSIVE EDUCATION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS KIDS PROGRAM FUNDED BY THE U.S. BUREAU OF EDUCATION OF THE HANDICAPPED AND LOCATED AT THE FAR WEST LABORATORY IN SAN FRANCISCO. OTHER MATERIALS FOCUS ON PROVIDING RESPONSIVE EDUCATION TO INTEGRATED SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN AND INCLUDE POSITION PAPERS, CURRICULA AND A PROGRAM FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT.

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MYTH: DEAF PEOPLE LEAD TOTALLY DIFFERENT LIVES THAN OTHER PEOPLE.

IN FACT, THEY DO THE SAME THINGS OTHER PEOPLE DO. THEY GO TO THE STORE, THE MOVIES, CLEAN THEIR HOMES, WATCH TV, DRIVE CARS AND TALK ON THE TELEPHONE. THEY GET MARRIED AND THEY PAY TAXES. CHANCES ARE THAT WHEN YOU MEET A DEAF PERSON YOU'LL SHARE SOME INTERESTS YOU CAN EXPLORE TOGETHER.

MYTH: PEOPLE WHO ARE MENTALLY RETARDED HAVE ABNORMALLY STRONG SEX DRIVES WHICH THEY CAN'T CONTROL.

IN FACT, THEY HAVE THE SAME FEELINGS AND NEEDS AS OTHER PERSONS. BECAUSE THEY ARE OFTEN MORE OPEN AND LESS INHIBITED IN THEIR SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, THEY SOMETIMES ARE MISINTERPRETED AND FEARED OR THOUGHT TO BE UNNATURAL. THESE ATTITUDES ARE UNFAIR.

** THESE MATERIALS ARE DESIGNED TO BE CUT OUT AND PASTED ONTO 4" X 6" INDEX CARDS FOR USE IN INSERVICE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

MYTH: ALL DEAF PERSONS LACK THE ABILITY TO SPEAK.

IN FACT, DEAF PERSONS CAN'T AUTOMATICALLY CONTROL THE VOLUME AND TONE OF THEIR VOICES, BUT MANY LEARN TO SPEAK IN SPECIAL CLASSES. MANY HAVE NORMAL VOCAL CORDS, BUT THEY CAN'T HEAR THEMSELVES SPEAK, SO THEIR VOICES MAY AT FIRST BE DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND. MOST PEOPLE CAN UNDERSTAND "DEAF SPEECH" ONCE THEY BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO HEARING IT.

MYTH: ALL PERSONS WITH A HEARING LOSS CAN READ LIPS.

IN FACT, EVEN A PRACTICED DEAF LISTENER CAN UNDERSTAND ONLY 30 TO 40% OF THE SPOKEN SOUNDS BEING TRANSMITTED. EVERYONE TO SOME EXTENT RELIES ON READING THE LIPS OF ANOTHER PERSON. IN ADDITION TO READING LIPS, DEAF INDIVIDUALS ALSO WATCH FACIAL EXPRESSIONS AND BODY LANGUAGE. MANY WORDS LIKE "PUMP" AND "BUMP" LOOK VERY SIMILAR BEING FORMED BY THE LIPS. PAPER AND PENCIL AND SIGN LANGUAGE ARE OTHER TOOLS THAT THE DEAF USE TO COMMUNICATE.

MYTH: ALL WHEELCHAIR USERS ARE PARALYZED AND ARE "CONFINED" TO THEIR WHEELCHAIRS.

IN FACT, NOT ALL WHEELCHAIR RIDERS ARE PARALYZED. MANY CAN WALK WITH THE AID OF CANES, BRACES, CRUTCHES, AND/OR WALKERS. BUT SOMETIMES, IT IS EASIER AND FASTER FOR THEM TO MOVE ABOUT IN A WHEELCHAIR. PEOPLE WHO USE THEM OFTEN MOVE TO FURNITURE AND CARS, AND ARE NOT "CONFINED" TO THEIR CHAIRS.

MYTH: IT IS RUDE FOR CHILDREN TO BE CURIOUS OR ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT A WHEELCHAIR TO A WHEELCHAIR USER.

IN FACT, THE CURIOSITY OF CHILDREN IS A WONDERFUL LEARNING TOOL AND WHEELCHAIR USERS ARE USUALLY VERY WILLING AND HAPPY TO ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT ITS USE AND THEIR SPECIAL NEEDS. GIVING CHILDREN THE IMPRESSION IT'S NOT POLITE TO DISCUSS DISABILITY CAN GIVE RISE TO FEAR ABOUT WHEELCHAIRS AND THEIR USERS. CHILDREN OFTEN PICK UP THEIR ATTITUDES FROM ADULTS THEY RESPECT AND IT'S IMPORTANT THAT ADULTS DON'T CONVEY DISAPPROVAL OR FEAR THAT WILL INHIBIT THE CHILD'S SPONTANEOUS CURIOSITY.

MYTH: PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY EXPECT NON-DISABLED PEOPLE TO HELP THEM.

IN FACT, SOCIETY DOES ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES TO ALL CITIZENS. ON A PERSONAL LEVEL, AS A MATTER OF COMMON COURTESY, MOST INDIVIDUALS WILL HELP OTHER INDIVIDUALS ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY ARE ASKED. NO ONE TAKES FOR GRANTED A "STEP AND FETCH IT" RESPONSE. ONE CAN ONLY STATE A NEED, ASK FOR ASSISTANCE, AND THANK THE HELPER.

MYTH: ONLY UNFORTUNATE OR POOR PEOPLE COME IN CONTACT WITH A PERSON WITH A DIFFERENCE.

IN FACT, FEW PEOPLE WILL TRAVEL THROUGH THEIR ENTIRE LIVES WITHOUT GOING THROUGH A PERIOD OF DISABILITY OF ONE KIND OR ANOTHER OF SOME DEGREE OF MAGNITUDE. FURTHER, MANY NON-DISABLED PEOPLE HAVE BUSINESS ACQUAINTANCES, FAMILY MEMBERS, FRIENDS OR SPOUSES WHO ARE DISABLED.

MYTH: DISABLED CHILDREN REQUIRE MORE LOVE THAN OTHERS.

IN FACT, THE ASSUMPTION THAT DISABLED CHILDREN NEED MORE LOVE THAN OTHERS IMPLIES PITY TOWARD THEM. CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS DO NOT NEED MORE LOVE THAN OTHER CHILDREN, BUT THEY DO NEED LESS REJECTION THAN THEY OFTEN RECEIVE.

MYTH: THE FUTURE IS BLEAK FOR DISABLED CHILDREN.

IN FACT, DISABLED CHILDREN, LIKE OTHERS, HAVE BEEN FOUND TO HAVE HIGH PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GOALS. THESE EXPECTATIONS NEED TO BE SUPPORTED AND NOT BE EDUCATED AWAY. AS SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS DIMINISH FOR DISABLED CHILDREN, MORE OF THEIR GOALS WILL BECOME ACTUALIZED. RESEARCH IN EXPECTANCY THEORY INDICATES THAT IF SOCIETY DISCRIMINATES AGAINST DISABLED INDIVIDUALS, A DISMAL FUTURE MAY, IN FACT, BECOME A REALITY.

MYTH: DISABLED CHILDREN HAVE A HEART OF GOLD.

IN FACT, ONE'S DISABILITY IS NOT THE ONLY DETERMINER OF ONE'S PERSONALITY. IT'S FREQUENTLY SAID, "HE'S NOT VERY BRIGHT, BUT HE'S SUCH A GOOD BOY." "SHE HAS A SEVERE SPEECH IMPAIRMENT, BUT HER PERSONALITY MORE THAN MAKES UP FOR IT." SUCH NOTIONS ALSO IMPLY THAT SPECIAL NEEDS KIDS ARE INNOCENT, NAIVE, GOODNATURED PEOPLE. THE ARE JUST AS MISCHIEVIOUS AND SOMETIMES AS BAD-TEMPERED AS THE STUDENT ACROSS THE AISLE OR THE WORKER AT THE NEXT DESK.

MYTH: DISABLED CHILDREN REQUIRE MORE PATIENCE.

IN FACT, EACH PERSON LEARNS AND DEVELOPS AT A DIFFERENT RATE AND ANYONE'S EXPECTATIONS FOR ANY INDIVIDUAL MUST REFLECT ONE'S KNOWLEDGE OF THAT INDIVIDUAL. DISABLED PERSONS ARE TOO OFTEN CHARACTERIZED AS DEPENDENT EVEN WHEN THEY HAVE DEMONSTRATED THEIR INDEPENDENCE.

MYTH: DISABLED CHILDREN ARE SICK OR DANGEROUS.

IN FACT, CHILDREN HAVING DISABILITIES THAT AFFECT THEIR HEALTH MAY BE ILL MUCH OF THE TIME. HOWEVER, MOST DISABLED CHILDREN ARE SICK NO MORE OFTEN THAN NON-DISABLED CHILDREN. THE RELATED FEAR THAT THE DISABLED ARE DANGEROUS, OR THAT THEIR DISABILITIES ARE CONTAGIOUS, DIRECTLY CONTRADICTS THE MYTH THAT DISABLED CHILDREN HAVE HEARTS OF GOLD.

MYTH: CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND ABLE-BODIED CHILDREN HAVE WIDELY DIFFERENT GOALS.

IN FACT, DISABILITY CUTS THROUGH ALL SEGMENTS OF SOCIETY. DISABLED CHILDREN COME FROM A VARIETY OF ENVIRONMENTS JUST AS NON-DISABLED CHILDREN DO. GOALS ARE INDIVIDUAL CHOICES AND ASPIRATIONS AND ARE NOT A FUNCTION OF DISABILITY.

MYTH: DISABLED CHILDREN ARE SAD.

IN FACT, WHILE DISABLED PEOPLE MAY FEEL ANGRY AT HAVING TO ENDURE THE FRUSTRATIONS OF HAVING A DISABILITY, THEY ARE NO SADDER THAN NON-DISABLED PEOPLE. THEY FEEL AND EXPRESS HAPPINESS, JOY, SADNESS, LONELINESS, ANGER, LOVE, AND OTHER FEELINGS JUST LIKE OTHER PEOPLE.

MYTH: DISABLED CHILDREN PREFER TO BE TOGETHER.

IN FACT, LIKE OTHER GROUPS DEVALUED BY SOCIETY, THEY OFTEN ARE FORCED INTO CLOSE PROXIMITY. THE ELDERLY, THE POOR, AND PEOPLE OF VARIOUS RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS ARE OTHER EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE FORCED INTO ISOLATED GROUPS. THE CHOICE TO PARTICIPATE IN EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL, VOCATIONAL, AND OTHER EXPERIENCES WITH NON-DISABLED ADULTS AS INDIVIDUALS HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN THEIR CHOICE TO MAKE.

MYTH: PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ARE ANGRY WITH AND RESENT ABLE-BODIED PEOPLE.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ARE NOT ANGRY WITH OR RESENTFUL OF ABLE-BODIED PEOPLE. EACH OF US EXPERIENCES FRUSTRATION IN OUR LIVES. WHILE THE FRUSTRATIONS OF DISABLED INDIVIDUALS MAY BE DIRECTED TOWARD ASPECTS OF AN INACCESSIBLE WORLD, SUCH AS MANEUVERING UP A CURB IN A WHEELCHAIR, THAT FRUSTRATION IS NO DIFFERENT THEN, SAY, WAITING TO GET GAS, WHICH MANY PEOPLE EXPERIENCE.

MYTH: (YOU WRITE IN A COMMON MYTH.)

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